

Headship 2: Interviews

Geoff Barton

The highs and lows of headship can take you by surprise. Sometimes you feel like one of those loyal but sinister Alsatians at police dog shows: here's the next burning hoop you're expected to jump through – whether it's managing the upper pay spine debacle, health & safety issues, implementing the Freedom of Information Act, and all the other stuff that feels so far removed from classroom realities.

But it can also feel – not every day, I grant you – like the best job in the world.

This constant emotional see-sawing, the oscillation between depression and euphoria is one of the hardest parts of the job to accept, and it frequently prompts me to think “how exactly did I get here?”

For me, the lottery of deputy headship interviews was more dizzying and unpredictable than finally getting my headship. I must have had seven or eight interviews to become a deputy. At most of these I said something where you could see the headteacher wince. At one school – asked what would be the first evidence of my impact – I said that I'd stop all the adults from picking up litter whilst the passively students watched them from the sidelines. I might as well have carried a sign saying “arrogant git”.

On the other hand, I learnt something from all the evasive debriefings (“we liked your vision ... not absolutely sure how you'd fit our ethos”). I came away from failed interviews pleased at least that I'd been true to myself. What a disaster if they'd recruited someone who wasn't really me, just a smartly-suited pretence.

That was even more important with the three headship interviews I had. The first was at a large comprehensive school that clung to its grammar school roots. I was woefully out of

my depth. “How would you develop our wedding reception business?” bellowed a hard-of-hearing governor. I confess I hadn’t covered this on my NPQH course. The governors wanted someone with entrepreneurial prowess whilst I, quaintly, was expecting to talk about teaching and learning. I was sent home, relieved, at the earliest opportunity.

My next interview was at a school I fell in love with. I could imagine myself there, strutting the corridors, inspiring the masses in assemblies. I used the interview day to talk to everyone – caretaker, teaching assistants, governors. I mounted a kind of smarm offensive. The result was that two of us from eight were taken through to the final interviews. Too excited to sleep, I got up at 2 am on the day of the interview, paced nervously round my hotel room preparing possible answers to possible questions, got myself all wound up and kind of faded away mid-interview.

All interviews take their emotional toll: the inner strength we have to muster is extraordinary. But this one left me dejected.

It’s strange, if clichéd, though how you get stronger from adversity. In the grimmest moments of an intractable personnel issue when I was Head of English, my line-manager said: “You’ll be stronger for this”. How dare you, I thought. How presumptuous. Instead of just pontificating about the future, do something to help me now.

But I realise how right he was. I dealt back then with the toughest issue of my career so far, and as a consequence I am now much more confident, measured and savvy than I was then. My guess is that you don’t need to have encountered every problem in advance that you’ll face as a headteacher, but it helps if you have dealt with around 75% of them. I think there’s probably a tipping-point at which you know you have enough experience to prepare you to tackle the familiar and unfamiliar with at least a delusion of confidence.

This is particularly important during your critical first year of headship, where it’s so important to know who you are, what you believe in and at least be able to feign knowing what you are doing.

In the last issue I suggested six survival hints for your first year. Here, looking back from the middle of my third, are the final four suggestions.

7: You can please some of the people some of the time – don't wish for more

Headship really isn't the job for someone who craves popularity. Masochistically, every half term I do anonymous surveys of staff and students. These always confirm that – however much I've tried – there are some people who simply don't like what I'm doing. In my latest survey 85% of staff think I'm providing reasonable or good leadership. Predictably, I'm niggled by the 15% who don't; but then I'm not sure I've ever worked with a really good head who didn't have to make difficult and unpopular decisions. It's a fact of life. So rather than courting popularity, far better to have clear principles, stick with them, articulate them, and keep pushing forward.

When it gets grim, and you're following your instincts in the face of opposition from people you trust, it's especially hard. I find a number of books hugely reassuring and even inspiring. I'm a big fan of Michael Barber's [The Learning Game](#) which, written in 1997, maps out Labour's education ambitions almost chapter by chapter. Michael Fullan's [What's Worth Fighting for in Headship](#) and Kate Myers (et al), [The Intelligent School](#). All of these provide a kind of moral sustenance when you need it, a reminder of the bigger issues that we're fighting for, as well as useful ammunition (in the form of statistics and quotations) to help provide a rationale for what you're doing.

8: It's hard to over-communicate

On my first day of headship, at the flippant suggestion of my deputy head, I produced a "Barton Bulletin" which outlined things that are going on. It's been published every day since – an A4 page of bullet points. Sometimes it lists meetings I'm having, or news about site developments or observations on what I've seen around school. Posted alongside the daily cover list, it has become an institution – a chance for me to reinforce

key messages, to keep staff informed about various issues, and a forum for a few in-jokes. Occasionally I include photographs of activities I have seen, “Tuesday’s teaching tip” or a thought for the day. What began as a joke has become an important part of our communication system.

Alongside it, I write a weekly article in the staff bulletin, usually setting out some point of procedure or quoting feedback from a survey or evaluation. It reflects on the past week and points to events of the week ahead. Again, it’s about reinforcing key messages on expectations of uniform, behaviour, lesson protocols.

If it all sounds terribly New Labour, I think we have to remind ourselves that being part of a large organisation can feel, for staff and students, an alienating and detached experience. It can be easy to inhabit your own small area of the pond, without knowing what’s going on above the surface. I therefore tend to keep repeating essential messages, reminding people of school priorities, and constantly emphasising the need for a coherent approach.

9: Measure what we value

But we’ve all worked in schools where at the weekly staff briefing the headteacher has asked staff to reinforce expectations of uniform and then by the end of the day, after 5 lessons with students incorrectly dressed, you feel you’re the only one upholding the rules. To me, if you’re going to have school uniform then it needs to be enforced. And you don’t do that simply by repeating each week that people need to enforce it.

One of the most informative training sessions I ever attended was led by John McBeath, now Professor of School Improvement at Cambridge University. He says “we should measure what we value rather than valuing what we can measure”. He’s a big proponent of using small-scale surveys and questionnaires. I have found these invaluable – the single most useful strategy for raising standards.

My questionnaires focus on the minutiae of school life as much as the bigger issues. I ask how visible the leadership team has been; how well our ICT support team work; what people think of the clarity of our behaviour expectations. Crucially, every term, I ask staff to rate my leadership. Here are the questions from my most recent survey of staff:

- 1 How would you rate the performance of our **computer system**?
(low/poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 (high/good)
- 2 How helpful has the **ICT Support Team** been?
(low/poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 (high/good)
- 3 How well have we managed **cover**?
(low/poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 (high/good)
- 4 How would you rate student **behaviour**?
(low/poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 (high/good)
- 5 How **visible** has the leadership team been?
(low/poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 (high/good)
- 6 Has a member of the leadership team **visited** your tutor group? Yes / No
- 7 Has a member of the leadership team **visited** one of your lessons? Yes / No
- 8 How would you rate Geoff Barton's **leadership**?
(low/poor) 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 (high/good)
- 9 Are expectations on **uniform** clear? Yes / No
- 10 Are our expectations about **behaviour** clear? Yes / No
- 11 Do you find Monday **staff briefings** useful? Yes / No
- 12 Do you find **curriculum team** after-school meetings useful? Yes / No
- 13 Do you find **tutor team** after-school meetings useful? Yes / No
- 14 Do you feel **well informed** about things that are happening in school? Yes / No
- 15 Are we meeting your **training** needs? Yes / No

I then publish the results, to staff and governors, including all comments that might have been made. At staff meetings I talk about how the survey has informed practice and policy. In the past week I have taken a decision against my own instinct because of the overwhelming view of staff: I wouldn't have known it without the questionnaire.

More unusually, I use surveys on a regular basis to measure how consistent we are on the small details of school life. Members of the leadership team visit tutor groups on a random basis and answer yes or no to questions like this:

- Is every student wearing shoes (not trainers)
- Is every students sitting without a coat on?

- Is jewellery acceptable?

Heads of Year get the full survey results, showing them which tutor groups are consistent and where there are issues. The headline results are published in my Bulletin – eg “This week our survey showed that 96% of students were in correct uniform”. All of this reinforces the good practice of those staff who are enforcing expectations: they can see that their efforts are being noticed. I make a point of dropping a line to these staff at the end of each term to thank them, and to all staff who have had 100% attendance in the course of the term.

On paper this sounds Big Brotherish, I imagine. In reality it has created a culture which is in keeping with David Reynolds’ research into high reliability organisations. He compares schools with air traffic control systems and wonders why we should accept in our profession a level of failure that would be unacceptable in others. This leads to the concept of right-first-time schooling.

That, I suspect, arises out of having the systems in place to ensure consistency, that the equal opportunities of students are served by a staff team who not only share collective approach, but put it into practice.

10: Wait for the Oscar

I’m still surprised how much acting there is in the job. Sometimes I have to pretend to be angry with students who are wheeled before me when I don’t really feel angry at all. Sometimes I have to pretend I understand issues that people are talking to me about. I have to look as if I’m not nervous before large meetings. I pretend to know where to find answers to questions on matters of pensions and maternity entitlements.

Much of my working day is spent pretending, in playing the part of headteacher. In the early days I used to do a double-take when someone said “The Head says ...”. This was

ME they were talking about, not just Geoff Barton but “the Head”. Sometimes they even say “Headmaster”.

So I accept that part of being a head is playing the part of being the head. I draw the line at doing that when I go shopping, when some people appear to think I’m still public property, but I’m happy to dress for the part and give it my all during working hours. I may, however, be over-ambitious in anticipating an Oscar.

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